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COMPOSITIONAL MUTATIONS: NICK LAND AND LIBIDINAL MATERIALISM

ECONOFICTION, PHILOFICTION BATAILLE, EXCESS, NICK LAND, SOLAR ECONOMY, WASTE

With the libidinal reformulation of being as composition 'one acquires degrees of being, one loses that which has being.'

– Nick Land, *A Thirst for Annihilation*

Tracing Nietzsche's *libidinal energetics* Nick Land would see four major thrusts: 1) a concerted questioning of the logicomathematical conception of the same, equal, or identical, *die Gleichheit*, which is dissolved into a general energetics of compositions; of types, varieties, species, regularities; 2) a figure of eternal recurrence, stretched between a thermodynamic baseline (Boltzmann's theory of eternal recurrence) and a libidinal summit, a theoretical machine for transmuting ontologico-scientific discoveries into excitations. (30-31); 3) a general theory of hierarchies, of order as rank-order (composition). (31); and, 4) a diagnosis of nihilism, of the hyperbolic of desire (31).

Base or Libidinal materialism destroys the metaphysics of Being for a process oriented and fluidic libidinal energetics that would enable the "power to conserve, transmit, circulate, and enhance compositions, the power that is assimilated in the marking, reserving, and appropriating of compositions, and the power released in the disinhibition, dissipation, and Dionysian unleashing of compositions" (30). This is central to any base materialist project. And, one should not confuse Land's system with the science of thermodynamics, because "it does not distinguish between power and energy, or between negentropy and energy" (30). Rather than an ontology it is outside metaphysics altogether, allowing the compositional flows to engender their own matrix of possibilities. Yet, it does not do away with 'Being,' it acknowledges that it is an *effect* of composition, a pre-ontological development out of chaos (thermospasm). Rather than the transcendental/empirical divide (as in Kant), we discover intensive sequences or events, returns within scaled intervals of history (31). The insatiability of desire, the compositional movement across scales of intensity, the recurrence of pain and ecstasy, the never-resting movement of self-overcoming immanence rather than transcendence.

Freud will follow Nietzsche's lead and conceive desire as plenitude and productivity itself rather than as in Lacan, as "lack, representation, or intention, but as dissipative energetic flow, inhibited by the damming and channeling apparatus of the secondary process (domain of the reality principle)" (31). As sublimation and defensive repression: displacement, dislocation, compression. Forget *telos*, there is no goal, only pleasure and unpleasure; and, "unpleasure is primary excitation or tension which is relieved by the equilibrating flux of sexual behavior" (or, as Land is fond of reminding us: there is no goal, only Zero) (31). As he'll restate it:

This compulsion to zero is—notoriously—ambivalent in Freud's text: 'the mental apparatus endeavours to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant' (31).

The Oedipal myth for Freud is the drama of desire and survival vying with each other over a living corpse. Desire seeks to return to equilibrium and death, while the son of time is complicit in seeking survival at any cost. Which will lead Land to observe:

It is because of this basic prejudice against the claims of desire that psychoanalysis has always had a tendency to degenerate into a technology of repression that subtilizes, and therefore reinforces, the authority of the ego. In the terms both of the reality principle and the conservative moment of psychoanalysis, desire is a negative pressure working against the conservation of life, a dangerous internal onslaught against the self, tending with inexorable force towards the immolation of the individual and his civilization. (32)

Land will place this within a Solar economy following Bataille, seeing organic life-forms as entering a maze, "maze-wanderers," who seek to escape in long wanderings of the labyrinth the fatal truth at the center of the maze: Death. He will then ask: "What is the source of the 'decisive external influences' that propel the mazes of life, if not the sun?" (33)

Without going into the full details, I add only that Land follows Bataille's economics of expenditure, acquisition, and excess – quoting Bataille: **'It is of the essence of life to produce more energy than that expended in order to live.'** In other words, the biochemical processes are able to be envisaged as accumulations and expenditures of energy: all accumulation requires an expense (functional energy, displacement, combat, work) but the latter is always inferior to the former' [VII 473]. (36) [my italics]

A careful reader of Marx's work Land would touch on the notions of surplus value and profit by way of Marx's subtle definition of labour as 'labour-power' [Arbeitskraft] for the object of transaction between worker and employer, and the word 'labour' [Arbeit] for the value produced in the commodity. He'll go on to say,

Having thus distinguished the concepts of 'labour' and 'labour-power' the next step was to explore the possibility that labour-power might function as a commodity like any other, trading at a price set by the quantity of labour it had taken to produce. The difference between the capacity for work and the quantity of work necessary to reproduce that capacity would unlock the great mystery of the origin of profit.(36).

Ultimately Marx would come up with a formula for profit as

Value of labour—Price of labour=Profit

Land would ask: *But why is it that labour-power comes to trade itself at a price barely adequate to its subsistence?* Land would see both a historical and systematic reason for this. First there was the removal of the peasants from their ties to the land during the period that came to be known as the 'Enclosure' in which they were "in the language of liberal ideology the peasantry is thus 'freed' from its ties to agrarian production" (37). Next, to crudely summarize Marx's theory without overburdening the reader, Marx would make a distinction between "use value" and "exchange value" which would allow capital to circulate between "variable" and "fixed" forms of capital, thereby providing what Marx "calls the ratio of variable capital to fixed capital the organic composition of capital, and argues that the relative increase in use values, or improvements in productivity, are—given an undistorted labour market—associated with a relative increase in the proportion of fixed capital, and thus a decrease in profit. (38)".

Land tells us that ever since Marxian theory has been dogged by two problems: first, there is the empirical evidence of increasing metropolitan profit and wage rates, often somewhat hastily interpreted as a violation of Marx's theory (38); and, second, is the problem associated with a state-capital complex, and is that of 'bureaucratic socialism' or 'red' totalitarianism. (38). But, as Land will tell us, and I quote at length:

Both of these types of problem are irrelevant to the Marxism of Bataille, because they stem, respectively, from theoretical and practical economism; from the implicit assumption that socialism should be an enhanced system of production, that capitalism is too cynical, immoral, and wasteful, that revolution is a means to replace one economic order with a more efficient one, and that a socialist regime should administer the public accumulation of productive resources. For Bataille, on the contrary, 'capital' is not a cohesive or formalizable system, but the tyranny of good (the more or less thorough rationalization of consumption in the interests of accumulation), revolution is not a means but an absolute end, and society collapses towards post-bourgeois community not through growth, but in sacrificial festivity.(38).

So the notion of the "tyranny of the good," and permanent revolution in "sacrificial festivity" are at the heart of the Bataillean cosmos. For Bataille the economy is based on "wastage," and that "all terrestrial economic systems are particular elements within a general energy system, founded upon the unilateral discharge of solar radiation" (38). Because of the excessive capitalist production cycles the "world is thus perpetually choked or poisoned by its own riches, stimulated to develop mechanisms for the elimination of excess"; so that 'it is not necessity but its contrary, "luxury", which poses the fundamental problems of living matter and mankind' (39). And, as Land will suggest, in such a geo-strategic economy the only way to solve the problem of excess it is necessary that consumption overflows its rational or reproductive form to achieve a condition of pure or unredeemed loss, passing over into sacrificial ecstasy or 'sovereignty' (39).

Yet, against such a Solar economy our present Global Capitalism is based on a 'refusal of expenditure and loss' and/or libidinal economy of 'sacrificial ecstasy' (39). Our present capital economy is thus one that is regulated as if the problem of consumption could be derived in principle from that of production, so that it would always be determinable as an insufficiency of demand(39). Whereas, as Land states it, Bataille's economy "does not see a problem for production in the perpetual reproduction of excess, but rather, in a manner marking the most radical discontinuity in respect to classical political economy, sees production itself as intrinsically problematic *precisely insofar as it succeeds*" (40).

1. Land, Nick. A Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism. (Routledge, 1992)

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